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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 0531
RUEHUM/AMEMBASSY ULAANBAATAR 0081
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0186
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENTIANE 000025

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, EAP/K, PRM, DRL/SENK, DRL, IO;
PACOM FOR POLAD

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [KN](#) [KS](#) [LA](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [SMIG](#)

SUBJECT: NEW INFORMATION ON NORTH KOREANS DETAINED IN LAOS:
5 RELEASED; 3 STILL DETAINED

REF: A. VIENTIANE 0006

[1](#)B. 06 VIENTIANE 1220

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: South Korean Embassy Counsellor Lee told Poloffs January 11 that five North Korean refugees detained almost a month in northern Laos had been released by local authorities. The five are on their way to Vientiane from where the South Korean Embassy expects them to depart quietly to Thailand. Ms. Lee had no new information on the three North Korean girls detained in Vientiane. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) South Korean Embassy Counsellor Miyon Lee told Poloffs that her Embassy had written a letter directly to the local authorities in the northern Laos province of Oudomxay where five North Korean refugees had been held for almost a month. The letter requested that Oudomxay release the five "because they are Koreans" she explained. (Note: This contradicts Ms. Lee's comment to us last week that it remained unclear whether the five "are really North Koreans or Chinese." (ref A)) Surprisingly, since the South Korean Embassy had been earlier told the five had been "formally arrested" and thus officials had no latitude, the Oudomxay authorities decided to release the five. Ms. Lee opined this may have been because the local authorities "were tired of having to take care of the five" for all of these weeks. She affirmed the South Korean Embassy had made no monetary payments to the local officials in Oudomxay either for care of the five during the past month or to secure their release. (Note: Of course their families or other supporters may have done this directly.)

[1](#)3. (C) Ms. Lee said the five are on their way to Vientiane, perhaps arriving as soon as the afternoon of January 11. The South Korean Embassy will help put them in contact with a "broker" to help move them across the border into Thailand as soon as possible. (Note: Ms. Lee made clear that her Embassy does not pay the brokers, although the families or other supporters of the refugees may do so. (ref A)) Ms. Lee was clear that this case will not be over for her Embassy until the five are actually safely across the border.

[1](#)4. (C) Poloffs asked Ms. Lee for an update on the three North Korean teenage girls detained in Vientiane since November 19.

They also asked about the current rumor that the girls may want to go to the United States. Ms. Lee said there has been no movement toward releasing the three. Indeed, the fact that international organizations (UNICEF: UNDP) have raised their situation has made the possibility of a quiet release -- as was achieved in the Oudomxay case -- much more difficult. Ms. Lee said she had not heard anything about the three wanting to go to the United States since no one here has had direct contact with them.

15. (C) Comment: The only successes we have seen in dealing with the central or provincial governments in Laos on refugee issues have occurred in cases where there has been no international "spotlight." Formal attempts by international organizations or Vientiane-based Embassies to intervene have made more difficult the quiet diplomacy favored by the South Koreans. The fact that Oudomxay authorities were, for whatever reason, willing to release these five is a particularly good sign. The provincial capital of Muang Xay is a key transportation hub in northern Laos on the main transportation route from China's Yunnan Province.

16. (C) Comment continued: Once these five are able to depart Laos for Thailand, only the three girls remain in detention -- as far as we and the South Korean Embassy are aware. We cannot verify the recent claim by a U.S. NGO to PRM that the three girls would like to settle in the United States. We cannot even say with any certainty where they are being detained and question the source of this NGO's information.

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